



CULTIVATING



GREEN TOURISM

Area hotels and attractions lure visitors and protect the planet by adopting eco-friendly attitudes

by Beth Luberecki

For almost twenty years, the Ivey House Bed & Breakfast in Everglades City has made the most of its prime location on the western edge of Everglades National Park. In addition to providing lodging, the hotel connects its visitors with a variety of options for exploring the wild kingdom just outside its doors, from kayak rentals to guided canoe trips. “Our business is very much based around the environment,” says Michael Jacobs, resident manager of the Ivey House. “We’re basically an eco-lodge.”

So when the Florida Department of Environmental Protection established the Florida Green Lodging Program in 2004, the Ivey House, not surprisingly, got on board. “A lot of the things [required by the Green Lodging Program] we were already doing, but when we became aware of an actual certification, we thought it would be neat to go for it,” says Jacobs.

According to Kermit the Frog, it’s not that easy being green. But for the Ivey House and other members of Southwest Florida’s tourism sector, that’s definitely not the case. A number of hotels in the area have earned green designations from the

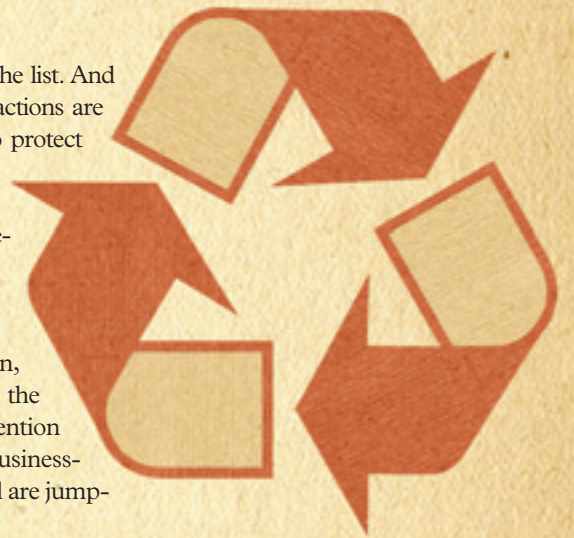
state, with more likely to join the list. And both new and established attractions are making even greater efforts to protect the natural side of the region, which is known as much for its parks and preserves as its beachfront resorts.

“This area has always been green; we just didn’t call it that,” says Nancy Hamilton, communications director for the Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau. “But I think a lot of businesses have seen the value in it and are jumping to go along that line.”

Gregory E. Allard, a Florida master naturalist, started Naples-based Southwest Florida EcoTours in 2006. “I educate people about our fragile Southwest Florida ecosystems,” he says. “People are genuinely concerned about the environment and if the biota unique to our region will still be here in the future.”

So Allard does his part to help ensure that it will be around for future generations to enjoy. “When I was researching the vehicle to use for our tours, I opted for a quality vehicle that runs on diesel

Southwest Florida EcoTours explore area parks and preserves like Naples’s Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary.





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— Gregory E. Allard, Southwest Florida EcoTours

fuel and gets good mileage,” he says. “I purchased an environmentally friendly vehicle because it doesn’t pollute the air with exhaust fumes.”

He’s glad to see that many of his local tourism cohorts have also taken steps to help protect the planet. “An environmentally friendly tourism sector definitely helps attract visitors to our area,” he says. “People are looking to conserve our natural resources, so this is why green

hotels are becoming so popular. They want to go to places that express the same philosophy as they do when it comes to conserving and protecting our environment.”

The Hyatt Regency Coconut Point Resort & Spa in Bonita Springs was built about seven years ago as a green hotel, as part of the Global Hyatt Corporation’s initiative to go green. It



was the first hotel in Florida to be awarded the Florida Green Lodging Program’s Two Palm Certification (certified hotels receive one, two, or three palms based on the scale and scope of environmentally friendly practices they’ve adopted), and it will likely soon be the only Florida hotel to have earned Three Palm status.

To get to that level, Hyatt Regency

Both the Hyatt Regency Coconut Point Resort & Spa (top) and the Ivey House Bed & Breakfast (bottom) have been certified green by the Florida Green Lodging Program.

TOP PHOTO COURTESY OF THE HYATT REGENCY COCONUT POINT RESORT & SPA; BOTTOM PHOTO COURTESY OF THE IVEY HOUSE



Coconut Point has added green elements to almost every area of its operation. Guest rooms feature low-flow toilets and showerheads as well as programmable thermostats. Cleaning products are non-toxic, fountains and sprinkler systems are on timers, dishwashers and laundry facilities use recycled rinse water, and energy recovery units on the roof of the hotel even use exhaust air to warm water before it goes to the boiler.

Plastic, glass, aluminum, and paper are recycled in all areas of the hotel, which has even found a way to offset the cost of doing so. "When we started, we didn't know there was actually a market for recycled cardboard," says Kelly Olsen, the resort's director of public relations. "We're paid by a company that buys cardboard boxes. That covers the cost of our other recycling efforts."

Other operating costs have actually been reduced through the use of energy-efficient lighting, timers, and sensors. "Our energy costs have been going down 6 to 10 percent a year since we've been opened," says Olsen. "That comes out to thousands and thousands of dollars in savings."

So going green can definitely be a

The in-room recycling program at the Crowne Plaza Fort Myers has been popular with the hotel's guests.

good business decision for a hotel, especially since Florida Governor Charlie Crist signed an executive order requiring, as of January 1, 2008, that state agencies and departments hold meetings and conferences at hotels participating in the Florida Green Lodging Program whenever possible.

"We felt it would give us a foot up, businesswise," says Jim Larkin, general manager of the Crowne Plaza Fort Myers, which has received the One Palm designation. "We're able to promote that fact to our customers and clients, which puts us in a better position to sell to our customers why they should choose us over our competition. There were additional up-front costs, but we believe that the long-term



rewards and savings will more than offset the initial costs."

The hotel's in-room recycling pro-



gram has been especially popular with its guests. "Even before our efforts we were seeing guests comment about the fact that they would like to have recycling containers for them to utilize," says Larkin. "I can honestly say we have not had any guests complain about it." Going forward, the Crowne Plaza will be looking into LED lighting options and considering a switch to a solar pool-heating system.

Recycling efforts at the Hilton Naples not only have pleased guests, but also have saved the hotel money. The property has decreased the amount of trash taken to the local landfill by approximately two tons per month, which saves more than \$3,000 a year in pick-up charges and tonnage fees, according to Edward Mummert, the hotel's purchasing manager.

But local hotels aren't the only ones getting in on the act. The Six Mile



Preserve. "So we couldn't have the building be any other way."

To obtain LEED certification, the

qualities. The water used for flushing toilets comes from a cistern that collects rainwater from the roof. The center is located on the site of an existing road bed, which resulted in minimal disturbance to the surrounding area, and it's oriented to maximize energy efficiency.

In Charlotte County, the new spring training facility for the Tampa Bay Rays will also take an environmentally friendly approach. The \$27-million project, scheduled to be completed in time for the 2009 spring training season, will include a retrofit of the existing stadium at the Charlotte Sports Park and a new 40,000-square-foot clubhouse. The clubhouse will feature a 2,000-square-foot demonstration green roof, an area of the roof that's covered with vegetation and can help improve everything from energy efficiency to air quality.

"We feel this green roof not only will

It's not just the planet that benefits. By making sure that the area's wild side is protected, and that people always have a way to explore it, local tourism officials help give visitors plenty of reasons to continue to find their way to Southwest Florida.

Cypress Slough Preserve in Fort Myers recently opened an interpretive center that is the first LEED-certified public building in Lee County. (LEED stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, a voluntary national rating system through the U.S. Green Building Council designed to promote the construction of high-performance, sustainable buildings.) "The overall message of the slough is to be environmentally responsible," says Heather Gienapp, senior program specialist at Six Mile Cypress Slough

slough had to meet certain criteria in five areas: sustainable site selection, materials and resources, conservation of energy and protection of the atmosphere, indoor environmental quality, and water efficiency. So it used rapidly renewable resources like bamboo and products containing recycled material like Trex decking in the construction of the building. Extra-large mats were placed at the entrance to reduce the number of allergens tracked into the building, and marmoleum flooring was chosen for its anti-static, anti-allergen, and antimicrobial

help in terms of energy conservation, but it also will be a great source of educational opportunities for the surrounding community," says Melanie Lenz, senior director of development for the Rays. "And when you're sitting in the stands, you'll actually be able to see the green roof, which is an aesthetic improvement instead of just looking at a roof."

Another green element of the site will be the use of a reclaimed water system and stormwater retention ponds to irrigate its playing fields. "There will be very little potable water used specifically for irrigation," says Lenz. "The fact that we're going to have six and a half Major League playing fields completely irrigated by non-potable water sources is, I think, a pretty great achievement."

That kind of thinking is welcome in Charlotte County, whose tourism board touts the area as "Florida's premier ecotourism destination." "This is a nature-based destination," says Becky Bovell,

Thanks to its recycling program, the Hilton Naples has reduced the amount of trash it sends to the landfill and saved a lot of money by doing so.





director of the Charlotte Harbor & the Gulf Islands Visitor's Bureau. "And the type of recreational and tourism activities that we promote and that comprise our amenities are all really environmentally friendly."

And it's not just the planet that benefits. By making sure that the area's wild side is protected, and that people always have a way to explore it, local tourism officials help to give visitors plenty of reasons to continue to find their way to Southwest Florida.

"From the research that we've seen, the perception of both leisure travelers and meeting planners is really much more environmentally active than it has been in the past," says Jack Wert, executive director of the Naples, Marco Island,

Everglades Convention and Visitors Bureau. "We think that if we're able to promote the fact that our area is environmentally sensitive and that several hotels have gone through this [green lodging] certification, it tells a good story to our potential visitors that this is an area that would be worth visiting."

"By keeping the area nice so that people want to return, it also means a healthy economy for the future," says Lee County's Hamilton. "Tourism is the number-one economic engine here in Lee County, so we want to keep people coming back." 🌴

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Overnighting Eco-Style

For more information about the Florida Green Lodging Program, visit www.dep.state.fl.us/greenlodging.com. As of press time, the following hotels in Southwest Florida had been certified as green lodging properties by the program:

Bellamera Hotel, Naples, 239-649-7333, www.bellaseranaples.com

Bridgewater Inn, Matlacha, 239-283-2423, www.bridgewaterinn.com

Crowne Plaza Fort Myers, 239-482-2900, www.cpfortmyers.com

Doubletree Guest Suites Naples, 239-593-8733, www.dtsuitesnaples.com

Hilton Marco Island Beach Resort, 239-394-5000, www.hiltonmarcoisland.com

Hilton Naples, 239-430-4900, www.hiltonnaples.com

Hyatt Regency Coconut Point Resort & Spa, Bonita Springs, 239-444-1234, www.coconutpoint.hyatt.com

Inn at Pelican Bay, Naples, 239-597-8777, www.innatpelicanbay.com

Inn at the Springs, Bonita Springs, 239-949-5913, www.theinnatthesprings.com

Ivey House Bed & Breakfast, Everglades City, 239-695-3299, www.iveyhouse.com

Naples Grande Beach Resort, 888-422-6177, www.naplesgranderesort.com

Pink Shell Beach Resort & Spa, Fort Myers Beach, 888-222-7465, www.pinkshell.com

Sanibel Harbour Resort & Spa, Fort Myers, 866-283-3273, www.sanibel-resort.com

Sleep Inn & Suites, Port Charlotte, 941-613-6300, www.portcharlottesleepinn.com



Naples's Bellamera Hotel is another green lodging option for travelers.

BOTTOM PHOTO COURTESY OF BELLASERA HOTEL